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Viet troop count was cut, colonel says

NEW YORK (AP) — Gen. William C. Westmoreland set a ceiling on enemy strength estimates in Vietnam, and his aides ordered figures reduced because they were "politically unacceptable," a retired colonel testified yesterday.

Col. Gains Hawkins, a key defense witness in Gen. Westmoreland's \$120 million libel suit against CBS, told jurors that he personally ordered lower-ranking analysts to slash estimates after receiving instructions from two top officials in Gen. Westmoreland's intelligence apparatus.

Gen. Westmoreland established a "command position ... not to exceed 300,000 total, bottom-line enemy strength," despite evidence indicating the correct figure was more than 500,000, Col. Hawkins said.

The testimony in the federal court trial echoed claims made by CBS in the 1982 documentary that sparked the lawsuit. In "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam

Deception," CBS said Gen. Westmoreland and his staff suppressed reports of higher-than-expected communist strength in 1967 to avoid jeopardizing political support for the war and contradicting the military's claims of progress.

Gen. Westmoreland, who commanded U.S. forces in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968, maintains that no information was suppressed and that CBS distorted an honest disagreement among intelligence analysts to make it appear that he had knowingly misled his superiors, including President Lyndon B. Johnson.

In 1966 and 1967, Col. Hawkins, now retired and living in West Point, Miss., was in charge of the "order of battle" branch of Gen. Westmoreland's staff in Saigon, which gave the official estimate of the strength and location of enemy forces.

Col. Hawkins said he briefed Gen. Westmoreland twice, in May and June of 1967, that new studies had shown that

communist political, administrative and self-defense forces were much larger than had been believed.

"In substance, Gen. Westmoreland said the higher figures were politically unacceptable," Col. Hawkins said. "The substance of this statement was like, 'What would I tell the president? What would I tell the Congress? What would be the reaction of the press to these higher figures? ... We've got to take another look at these figures.'"

Col. Hawkins said he "skimmed" a few thousand troops from the estimate, but the figures were again rejected.

At that point, he testified, he had several conversations with Gen. Westmoreland's intelligence chief, Brig. Gen. Phillip Davidson, and Gen. Davidson's director of intelligence production, Col. Charles A. Morris.

"Gen. Davidson reiterated in substance that the figures were unacceptable ... for the political impact they

carried. In fact, I never heard any criticism of our methodology."

Col. Hawkins said he told the higher officers, "You give me what figure you think it ought to be and I'll carry it out for you."

"From that time on I started receiving figures from Col. Morris," he added. "They subtracted down to the previous figure of a little under 300,000."

To win his case, Gen. Westmoreland must convince the jury that the program damaged his reputation with false charges, and that CBS broadcast the false charges knowingly or recklessly.

U.S. District Judge Pierre Leval told jurors that testimony in 18-week-old trial could conclude by Feb. 22. Deliberations could begin Feb. 23.